How-to Guide:
Evaluation Reference Group

Reference Group is crucial for your evaluation, and this guide will help you understand why, and how to establish one

Prepared by the evaluation services of DG INTPA, DG ENEST, DG MENA and FPI
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Purpose of this How-to Guide: This guide is designed to assist evaluation managers in understanding the significance of establishing and engaging a Reference Group for their evaluations. It outlines the steps for its formation and explains its role throughout the evaluation process.

Target audience: This guide is specifically prepared for evaluation managers preparing their evaluation Terms of Reference (ToR) under the FWC SEA 2023 – Lot 16. However, other evaluation stakeholders, including the M&E focal points and partners could also benefit from the guidance provided.

How to use this How-to Guide: We suggest that you navigate through the key points provided in this guide alongside the Terms of reference you are working on (see also ToR template and guidance for intervention level evaluations - SEA FWC SharePoint page, Section 2.2, Lot 16).

WHAT IS A REFERENCE GROUP?

The Reference Group (RG) is a steering group for an evaluation that acts as an interface between the evaluation managers (EM, from an EU Delegation or EC/DG headquarters) and the external evaluation team, and between the evaluation team and other stakeholders.

It is made up of a small group (at least three people) led by the evaluation manager and composed of representatives of entities involved in the intervention to be evaluated. Other stakeholders may include representatives from other EC services with specific thematic, sector or geographic knowledge, the partner government (central and/or local level), other development partners: including donor agencies, academia, think tanks, non-state actors such asnon-governmental organisations (NGOs) or civil society organisations. Depending on the nature of the evaluation, one or more technical experts can also be invited to participate.

The evaluation manager determines the composition of the Reference Group on a case-by-case basis, selecting members whose expertise aligns with different thematic and operational areas, also ensuring access to stakeholders, and support in monitoring and supervision throughout the life of the evaluation.

Working in the DG INTPA HQ in Brussels, I have been appointed as a member of several Reference Groups for evaluations, something I had never done when working in Delegations. My experience is that the process is useful and led to a more comprehensive and in-depth work done by the evaluators.

One of the key characteristics of the Reference Groups to which I participated was the involvement of colleagues from different sectors –even from other DGs – who either had a stake in the project or an expertise in the sector.

This diversity had an impact on how the evaluation was conducted with far more time being de- voted to the definition of the evaluation questions (EQ), due to the different understandings and backgrounds of the colleagues. As a consequence, the EQs were far better defined and ensuing discussions encompassed many more dimensions than I would have initially foreseen. In the end, this was reflected in the evaluation reports which tackled different angles to the issues addressed and also opened interesting prospects for synergies or linkage with other issues/projects.

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WHY ESTABLISH A REFERENCE GROUP?

Establishing a Reference Group for steering evaluations has many advantages in terms of ownership of the evaluation results as well as credibility and transparency of the evaluation process and findings. It allows the diversity of views on the intervention being evaluated to be expressed, and - as indicated in the Better Regulation package (SWD(2021) 305 final, tool #48) – an Inter-Service Group (or Reference Group in the case of intervention-level evaluations) is to be set up for each evaluation to be managed by EU Services. For these reasons, the ToR template and guidance for intervention-level evaluations (Lot 16) envisages the creation of a Reference Group (§ 2.2.3 'Management and steering of the evaluation').

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE REFERENCE GROUP IN AN EVALUATION PROCESS?

A reference group helps ensure access to information, accuracy of interpretations, and ownership of conclusions and recommendations. By acting as an interface not only between the EM and the evaluation team (ET), but also between the ET and other stakeholders, it opens doors and facilitates access to people and to relevant information sources and documentation. Notably (but not exhaustively), the reference group:

- Engages in discussions and provides feedback on the Terms of Reference (ToR)– including the proposed evaluation questions – prepared by the EM, thereby contributing to the relevance and ownership of the evaluation.
- Reviews the proposed evaluation methodology proposed by the ET, including evaluation questions, judgement criteria and tools and methods for data collection.
- Plays an important supportive role in quality assurance, discussing and providing feedback on notes and reports produced by the ET as well as on the findings, conclusions and recommendations arising from the evaluation.
- Ensures adherence to the evaluation principles: independence of evaluators; impartiality and usefulness of evaluation.

ROLES OF THE REFERENCE GROUP THROUGHOUT THE EVALUATION PROCESS

The reference group is usually invovled in the following ways and stages (to be adapted on a case-by-case basis).

1 > Preparing the evaluation ToR

ROLE: Providing input to, and feedback on the draft ToR e.g., proposing and reviewing evaluation questions.

2 > Kick-off meeting

ROLE: Participating, providing feedback, sharing of documents and contacts (often conducted by means of video conferencing).

3 > The Inception Phase

ROLE: Providing feedback, participating in the inception meeting/presentation, co-validation of the inception report before the next phase of the evaluation.

4 > Briefing meeting in country (if any)

ROLE: Participating and providing feedback.

5 > The Interim Phase

ROLE: Availability to facilitate desk and/or field activities: sharing documents, responding to specific questions (or even individual interviews with the evaluators), supporting the evaluation team to establish contact with resource persons or in accessing intervention areas.

6 > Debriefing meeting and review of interim report/notes

ROLE: Participating, discussing results, and providing feedback (often in country), and providing feedback and comments to the interim report/notes.

7 > Review final report & final meeting

ROLE: Participating, discussing results, and providing feedback.

8 > Dissemination of Evaluation Results

ROLE: Specific actions to support dissemination, where appropriate - facilitating knowledge transfer.

9 > Follow-up of Evaluation Results

ROLE: (i) contribute to the drafting of the follow-up action plan; and (ii) ensure timely follow-up of the recommendations as relevant.

At any time during the evaluation process

Interacting with other RG members, including the evaluation manager, and with the evaluation team - for any questions - suggestions - clarifications.

THE EVALUATION MANAGER, CHAIR OF THE REFERENCE GROUP

The EM contributes to the work of the RG like all other members by: reading and analysing deliverables, sharing opinions and information, exchanging with other RG members and with the evaluators, facilitating access to information/people/ places for the evaluation team. However, the EM plays a specific role within the RG. He/she:

- Chairs the RG and is the only person – in the RG – who has the mandate to formally engage the EU in the contractual relationship with the contractor, and acts as key reference point for the evaluation team
- Bears the contractual responsibility and is ultimately responsible for the overall quality of the evaluation process and deliverables, including: (i) the finalisation and publication of ToRs, (ii) the attribution of the contract; (iii) validation / rejection of a deliverable, and giving the green light to pass from one phase of the evaluation to the next; (iv) approval of payments to the contractor by communicating with the EU contract and finance sections.
- Prepares a clear agenda for RG meetings, invites RG members to follow it, ensures that discussions are balanced, impartial and constructive, writes a clear and concise report highlighting the points discussed and reports on decision points.
- Consolidates comments on deliverables made by the Reference Group members prior to their sharing with the evaluation team.

In case of a serious disagreement within the RG, and only as a last resort, arbitration will be carried out by the evaluation manager.

FAQS ON REFERENCE GROUPS

Should the reference group members be identified in the evaluation ToR?

Yes. The EM decides who should be invited to take part in the Reference Group on the basis of the expertise and knowledge that each member can contribute to the quality/usefulness of the evaluation. Even if not identified by their name, the number of reference group members should be specified in the ToR together with the clear naming of the institution/body they represent (e.g., one representative from DG INTPA/DG ENEST/DG MENA/FPI unit XX, one representative from the EU Delegation/Office in XXX, one representative from the thematic unit XXX, one representative from the Directorate of XXX of the Ministry of XXX, other donor agencies working in the sector, or geographic landscape, and other stakeholders including the academia, think tanks, and the relevant civil society organisations).

How many people should I include in the Reference Group?

Experience shows that a relatively small reference group (typically 3–6 participants for a small intervention evaluation; and 5–10 for more complex or strategic evaluations) is far more productive than a larger one. Membership should be manageable, with an emphasis on quality rather than quantity. Diversity should be a consideration to ensure the perspectives of different stakeholder groups are included in the steering of the evaluation. Such diversity of opinion broadens and enriches the scope and depth of the evaluation and ensures that as many voices as possible are heard.

When should potential members be invited to be part of the reference group?

It is recommended to engage with the potential members of the RG as early as possible. Ideally the RG should be already set up to comment on the draft ToR, especially to review and comment on the evaluation questions. This is key to paving the way for better acceptability/ ownership of the entire evaluation process and what will come out of it (namely conclusions and recommendations).

Should national counterparts be reference group members?

Including representative(s) of the partner country has the advantage of a higher level of acceptability and ownership of the evaluation findings and recommendations. In these cases, the relevant person(s) should be invited as early as possible to participate in the RG to maximise their sense of ownership. In those cases where it would be desirable to encourage ownership of the evaluation exercise by the national counterparts but for some reason e.g., RG size, fast track process or evaluation independence, this is not justified, the alternative can be to include them in a "consultative committee" invited from time to time to attend some of the evaluators' feedback/presentations.

Should implementing partners or TA contractors be reference group members?

The inclusion of implementing partners (IPs), and/or technical assistance (TA) contractors as full members in the reference group is generally not recommended. Their involvement could potentially disrupt group dynamic, as they have an interest in showing the success of 'their' intervention – which might have a negative impact on constructive and open debate around the performance of the evaluand (i.e. the subject of evaluation, such as intervention, a group of interventions or policy) and ultimately on the independence of the evaluation. At the same time, in some cases, it could very well be that their participation to the evaluation, not only as a key stakeholder which is always the case but with a more prominent role, could carry important benefits in terms of ownership of evaluation results and recommendations.

One approach is to invite implementing partners to join some reference group meetings as observers. The feasibility of this option should be assessed on a case-by-case basis. When taking this decision, the EM will also consider the evaluation purpose: i) if accountability is the main purpose, it is not recommended to have IPs included in the RG; ii) if the evaluation is predominantly for learning purposes, then IPs are more likely to be included as RG members.